

ED356100 1993-00-00 Young Children's Social Development: A Checklist. ERIC Digest.

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Early childhood educators have traditionally given high priority to enhancing young children's social development. During the last two decades a convincing body of evidence has accumulated to indicate that unless children achieve minimal social competence by about the age of six years, they have a high probability of being at risk throughout life. Hartup suggests that peer relationships contribute a great deal to both social and cognitive development and to the effectiveness with which we function as

adults (1992). He states that:

Indeed, the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is NOT IQ, NOT school grades, and NOT classroom behavior but, rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously "at risk" (Hartup, 1991).

The risks are many: poor mental health, dropping out of school, low achievement and other school difficulties, poor employment history, and so forth (see Katz and McClellan, 1991). Given the life-long consequences, relationships should be counted as the first of the four R's of education.

Because social development begins in the early years, it is appropriate that all early childhood programs include regular periodic formal and informal assessment of children's progress in the acquisition of social competence. The set of items presented below is based largely on research identifying elements of social competence in young children, and on studies in which the behavior of well-liked children has been compared to that of less well-liked children (Katz and McClellan, 1991).

THE SOCIAL ATTRIBUTES CHECKLIST

The checklist provided in this digest includes attributes of a child's social behavior and preschool experience which teachers should examine every three or four months. Consultations with parents and other caregivers help make the attributes and assessments realistic and reliable.

In using the checklist, teachers should pay attention to whether the attributes are typical. This requires sampling the child's functioning over a period of about three or four weeks. Any child can have one or two really bad days, for a variety of reasons; if assessments are to be reasonably reliable, judgments of the overall pattern of functioning over a period of about a month is required.

Healthy social development does not require that a child be a "social butterfly." The quality rather than quantity of a child's friendships is the important index to note. Keep in mind also that there is evidence that some children are simply shyer than others, and it may be counter-productive to push such children into social relations which make them uncomfortable (Katz and McClellan, 1991). Furthermore, unless that shyness is severe enough to prevent a child from enjoying most of the "good things of life," like birthday parties, picnics, and family outings, it is reasonable to assume that, when handled sensitively, the shyness will be spontaneously outgrown.

Many of the attributes listed in the checklist in this digest indicate adequate social growth if they USUALLY characterize the child. This qualifier is included to ensure that

occasional fluctuations do not lead to over-interpretation of children's temporary difficulties. On the basis of frequent direct contact with the child, observation in a variety of situations, and information obtained from parents and other caregivers, a teacher or caregiver can assess each child according to the checklist.

Teachers can observe and monitor interactions among the children and let children who rarely have difficulties attempt to solve conflicts by themselves before intervening. If a child appears to be doing well on most of the attributes and characteristics in the checklist, then it is reasonable to assume that occasional social difficulties will be outgrown without intervention.

However, if a child seems to be doing poorly on many of the items on the list, the adults responsible for his or her care can implement strategies that will help the child to overcome and outgrow social difficulties. We suggest that this checklist be used as a guide among teachers and parents. The intent is not to supply a prescription for "correct social behavior," but rather to help teachers observe, understand, and support children as they grow in social skillfulness. If a child seems to be doing poorly on many of the items on the list, the adults responsible for his or her care can implement strategies that will help the child to establish more satisfying relationships with other children (Katz and McClellan, 1991).

Finally, it is also important to keep in mind that children vary in social behavior for a variety of reasons. Research indicates that children have distinct personalities and temperaments from birth. In addition, nuclear and extended family relationships obviously affect social behavior. What is appropriate or effective social behavior in one culture may be less effective in another culture. Children from diverse cultural and family backgrounds thus may need help in bridging their differences and in finding ways to learn from and enjoy the company of one another. Teachers have a responsibility to be proactive rather than laissez faire in creating a classroom community that is open, honest, and accepting.

THE SOCIAL ATTRIBUTES CHECKLIST



I. Individual Attributes



The child:



1. Is USUALLY in a positive mood


-
- 2. Is not EXCESSIVELY dependent on the teacher, assistant or other adults
-
- 3. USUALLY comes to the program or setting willingly
-
- 4. USUALLY copes with rebuffs and reverses adequately
-
- 5. Shows the capacity to empathize
-
- 6. Has positive relationship with one or two peers; shows capacity to really care about them, miss them if absent, etc.
-
- 7. Displays the capacity for humor
-
- 8. Does not seem to be acutely or chronically lonely

II. SOCIAL SKILL ATTRIBUTES

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The child USUALLY:

-
- 1. Approaches others positively
-
- 2. Expresses wishes and preferences clearly; gives reasons for actions and positions



3. Asserts own rights and needs appropriately




4. Is not easily intimidated by bullies




5. Expresses frustrations and anger effectively and without harming others or property




6. Gains access to ongoing groups at play and work



7. Enters ongoing discussion on the subject; makes relevant contributions to ongoing activities



8. Takes turns fairly easily



9. Shows interest in others; exchanges information with and requests information from others appropriately



10. Negotiates and compromises with others appropriately



11. Does not draw inappropriate attention to self



12. Accepts and enjoys peers and adults of ethnic groups other than his or her own.

13. Gains access to ongoing groups at play and work



14. Interacts non-verbally with other children with smiles, waves, nods, etc.



III. PEER RELATIONSHIP ATTRIBUTES



The child is:



1. USUALLY accepted versus neglected or rejected by other children



2. SOMETIMES invited by other children to join them in play, friendship, and work.

This digest is adapted from the article, "Assessing the Social Development of Young Children. A Checklist of Social Attributes," which appeared in the Fall 1992 issue of DIMENSIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD (pp. 9-10).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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